FOUR CONSTITUENCIES: DILEMMAS OF THE PLANNER AS CIVIL SERVANT

Nigel H. Richardson

Department of Urban and Regional Planning
Ryerson Polytechnical Institute
Toronto, Ontario

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SUMMARY

The urban and regional planner who is also a public servant is potentially confronted with a perhaps unique set of ethical dilemmas. He is answerable simultaneously to four "constituencies": his personal values, his professional standards, his responsibilities to his elected political masters, and his obligation to serve the public interest. Because the very nature of the profession is to provide policy advice, the planner is particularly susceptible to conflicts between his professional and bureaucratic roles. This requires a clear definition of the nature, limitations and relationships of these two sets of imperatives. In particular, it is necessary that the planner should at all times remember, first, that a particular professional training does not automatically confer superior virtue and wisdom; second, that he is an advisor only, and that decision-making, for better or worse, is the right and responsibility of the elected representative; and third, that he has no legitimate mandate to subvert established governmental processes. On the other hand, he is entitled to expect from his political employers the respect for his professional role and integrity that is accorded to members of other professions who happen to be employed as public servants.

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AS CIVIL SERVANT

A well-known British Columbia architect once described planners[1] as "Boy Scouts with a power complex." Much as the witticism may be resented, honest self-examination would compel the planner to admit that there is more than a grain of truth in it. Unquestionably, a lot of people do go into urban and regional planning as a career because they have very definite ideas about how the world should be improved and they see planning as a means of steering society in what they believe to be the right direction.

Now of course there is nothing wrong with having social ideals and choosing one's profession to try to do something about them, but it does carry with it a serious danger of excessive self-righteousness. If one is convinced of the nobility of one's ends and the purity of one's motives, it is easy to assume that one has the right, even the duty, to impose one's views on others. But the employee of a government or a municipal council is more than likely to find that the views of the duly elected representatives of the people as to what is best for the common weal don't always coincide with his. That is a state of affairs which requires the planner to think clearly both about his professional role and about his moral responsibilities as a public servant. Dubious assumptions about the inherent moral superiority of the planner do not contribute constructively to resolving the dilemmas which planners inevitably face from time to time in the real world of politics and public administration.

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1 With apologies to all the other kinds, the word "planner" is here used exclusively as shorthand for "urban and regional planner."

These dilemmas are, of course, shared in some measure by public servants who are not planners, as well as by planners who are not public servants (who indeed confront ethical programs of their own). But it is fair to suggest that the planner who is also a public servant has to grapple with a particular set of moral imperatives which is rather different from those of either his bureaucratic colleagues or his professional confrères, and perhaps a little more difficult.

Consider the role of the planner in the public service. The essence of his task is to advise his elected employers on decisions relating to the future character and form of the area or community for which they are responsible. He is thus primarily a policy adviser. He is not, of course, the only kind of policy adviser, but it is at least arguable that he differs from the others in one or more of three significant respects. One is that the role is intrinsic to his profession and his professional education; hence his professional responsibilities and conscience are inseparable from his responsibilities and conscience as a public servant. Secondly, his role requires of him judgments about the public good which are much more comprehensive in scope, and at the same time much less easy to justify in rigorous terms, than those of most of his colleagues. Thirdly, his time horizon is in their terms almost meaninglessly remote and his concern with change rather than with the maintenance of the status quo often tends to make him somewhat suspect to his political masters. There is probably no other category of public servant which shares all three of these characteristics.

The kind of professional and moral problem (and really they cannot be separated) created by the peculiar role of the public servant planner emerges clearly if we consider that he is answerable simultaneously to four "constituencies": his personal convictions; his professional conscience; his elected employers; and the public at large, whom, by definition, he serves.

The first constituency is often the one that leads people into the planning profession in the first place, but paradoxically it is also the one most apt to lead them astray as professionals. Probably all planners have -- certainly all planners should have -- their own ideas about how people should behave, how society should function, how the world should be changed. Planners, like other people, have their own standards of personal conduct and their own ways of responding to what they perceive as moral problems. What is essential, however, is that the planner should recognise that his personal value system is just that: personal. It is not to be imposed arbitrarily or unknowingly on others. Unfortunately, this crucial principle, and its implications, is not always grasped. A good planner should understand that his particular view of the world is in large measure the product of his own background, upbringing and education, and that he has no more claim to wisdom or virtue than other people. Planners cannot escape being influenced by what they as individuals think to be right and wrong, good and bad; nor should they try. But it is imperative that they

identify clearly in their work what their value-judgments are and how they are influenced by them, not attempt to camouflage them under some such all-purpose rubric as "good planning" or "the public interest". It goes without saying that in order to do this they must first understand what their personal values in fact are, and not confuse taste or ideology with moral absolutes.

The planner's second constituency is his professional conscience. The concern here is not with matters like taking bribes from developers, but with the responsibility to reach well considered, intellectually honest conclusions on the basis of professional training and experience. This constituency has a sort of marital relationship with his first: normally they walk in harmony, but sometimes they conflict. Usually, what a planner believes to be sound in a professional sense will coincide with what he believes as a person to be right. But occasions can arise when a planner must, in good professional conscience, arrive at a conclusion which as an individual he regards as morally wrong. There is only one way to ensure that this will never happen, and that is to twist his starting premises to accommodate his values: which is just as professionally dishonest as an accountant cooking the books. To reject explicitly a particular conclusion, once reached, as morally unacceptable is one thing: to ensure in advance that the conclusion will not be reached is something quite different. As a professional, the planner must be prepared to muster his facts and present his conclusions as objectively as he can. That is not to say that the only data in which he may deal are quantitative; on the contrary, much of his job consists in inserting qualitative judgments into otherwise purely numerical

exercises. But it must be done openly, explicitly and at the appropriate point in the total process, not by stacking the deck at the beginning.

This is the discipline imposed by the professional conscience on the planner as human being; it imposes a very different, almost opposite discipline on the planner as bureaucrat.

This paper referred earlier to the difference between planners and other kinds of policy advisers. To generalise rather crudely, bureaucratic advisers to elected decision-makers can be divided into two groups: the specialists whose advice can be reduced to clear-cut, if not necessarily simple, technical or financial terms; and the career bureaucrats whose first loyalty is to the system itself and is not bound by particular professional imperatives (this is not meant in any perjorative sense). On the other hand, a planner's role relates to broad, and often highly politically sensitive, issues of public policy; and it is at the same time bound up with the very nature of his profession. Hence, he is peculiarly susceptible to conflicts between his professional conscience and what some, perhaps including himself, see as his duty as a good public servant. In other words, in the bluntest terms, his bureaucratic responsibility may be to carry out a political decision which, professionally, he regards as thoroughly bad. Thus, his sense of professional integrity may well demand, sooner or later, that he resist the decisions of his political masters and imperil his own future thereby. The roll of honour of planners who have done so is sadly long.

These politicians, of course, form the third constituency of the planner in the public service. To set the discussion of this constituency in context, it is necessary to recall that our system of government is based on the election, by universal suffrage, of representatives who are then charged with the responsibility for making decisions. They may do the job well or badly, but the responsibility is theirs and they, and only they, are accountable for their decisions; only they must pay the price at election time if the public thinks the decisions have been bad ones. The task of the public servant is to advise on and to execute policy, not to make it; and that is as it should be, because he is not elected, he is not accountable, he does not have to take the consequences if the voters reject the policy.

In any circumstances, it seems reasonable to accept as axiomatic that everyone owes a certain duty to the employer who hired him and pays his wages. This is perhaps especially true when the employer is a body of democratically elected representatives of the people. Yet there are members of the planning profession who seem almost to believe that the planner's principal responsibility is to oppose the policies and decisions of those representatives, that is, to work against his employer rather than for him. There are, of course, politicians who are less than brilliant and others whose motives are less than pure, and as already mentioned, there are certainly times when a planner has no honourable alternative to opposing the decisions of his political masters. But this is not at all the same as saying that it is his responsibility to do

so as a regular practice. On the contrary, he ought to accept that his employers are, for better or worse, the duly elected representatives of the people and therefore doubly entitled to his loyalty. The planner is not entitled to assume that political decisions are necessarily "wrong" simply because he disagrees with them; and he certainly has no mandate to regard himself as a sort of appointed and salaried Loyal Opposition, nor any right to try to subvert or frustrate the processes of government, no matter how much he dislikes their results. His right, and indeed his responsibility, both as a professional and as a public servant, is to argue within the system against decisions which he regards as wrong, and ultimately to resign his position if he cannot reconcile its demands with his personal or professional conscience. If he wishes to be the advocate of particular interests within the community, he must renounce any claim to be an impartial adviser to its political rulers; he cannot run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. If he wishes systematically to pursue political or social principles which are seriously at variance with those of the politicians who employ him, the only honest way to do so is by resigning and openly entering the political arena.

If the elected political representative is entitled to expect a certain level of loyalty from the professional planner he employs, however, there is by the same token a quid pro quo in the planner's right to expect the politician to respect his professional integrity. This means, in particular, that while the politician (as is his right) may choose to ignore the planner's advice, he is not entitled to misuse, misrepresent, or distort it. If a municipal authority (let us say) receives a report from the medical staff of its Department of Public Health drawing attention to health hazards arising from inadequate control of water pollution, it may bury or ignore the report, or release it with or without action or comment. But it is most unlikely to rewrite it to make it more politically palatable before releasing it to the public. Such falsification would cause an uproar in the medical profession, and a political scandal. Oddly, the same standards are not applied to planning reports, which are not infrequently made public as "the planners' recommendations" when they have in fact undergone "doctoring" after leaving the planners' hands. The fact that planners' reports and recommendations are likely, almost be definition, to be heavily charged with policy implications does not make this kind of tampering any more acceptable than it would be in the case of the technical findings and advice of engineers, pathologists or lawyers. The responsibility of the planner to give the best professional advice he can to his political employers, needs to be firmly distinguished from the responsibility of the public servant to prepare "political" statements

on behalf of those same employers: a distinction which, it must be said, ought to be made more clearly by some planners as well as by the politicians.

Before leaving the subject of the political constituency, some attention should be given to a particular situation with which planners, as well as other public servants, are increasingly confronted. It is one which throws into sharp focus the problem of conflict between professional and personal integrity, and duty to one's political masters. It is the position of the planner when called upon by a tribunal such as the Ontario Municipal Board or by some form of public enquiry, to express his professional opinion on a decision or action of his employer, or to reveal that the employer acted against his advice. In this case there may well be a clear conflict between private and professional conscience, and perhaps also the public interest, on the one hand, and duty as a public servant, at least as traditionally defined, on the other. It is clearly the professional responsibility of the planner on the witness stand to say, if necessary: "the position of my Council (or Minister, as the case may be) is so and so, but my professional opinion and advice is such and such", but he may nevertheless lose his job by doing so, and at best he is unlikely to do his career any good. He also raises some basic questions about the traditional relationship between politicians, public servants, and the public, questions with profound implications for the way in which government operates. But this is another subject, which will not be pursued here.

A good many planners seem to be arguing nowadays that all this business about the planner's duty to his elected employers is obsolete and irrelevant because his true responsibility is not to a group of politicians but to the public at large, as in fact the term "public servant" implies. And indeed the public is the planner's fourth constituency. It is often argued, and defensively so, that he is properly answerable to them, to the people who elect the politicians and whose taxes provide his salary. That the planner does indeed have an overriding responsibility to the public is beyond dispute; that is the very essence and meaning of his calling. But the problem is that in the real world there is no such thing as a single homogeneous "public", but many publics with different and conflicting interests. At the risk of labouring a point which is probably obvious, and certainly should be, the legitimate interests of any particular group may conflict with those of the next. Who then is the "public" for whom the planner works?

Some planners would resolve this problem by taking their client to be, not the public at large, but a particular element of it. This point of view has been very forcibly expressed thus by a prominent Canadian academic planner: "If planners wish to be at all progressive, their planning must explicitly, factually, ethically and philosophically represent the unrepresented (which also includes future generations)". Now this is a morally noble position, and one which is in part valid; but in the extreme form

in which it is stated it is simplistic and indeed dangerous, both practically and philosophically. It is simplistic because it ignores a number of serious questions about what, in practice, such a principle means and how it is to be applied. It is practically dangerous because if all planners adopted it, by definition none could conscientiously enter the employment of a duly constituted government at any level, so that the internal influence of planners on government would be removed -- a consequence hardly to be desired, at least by planners. It is philosophically dangerous because it would in reality leave the planner himself to be sole judge of the causes which he espoused and the positions which he took. Honesty compels it to be acknowledged that "representing the unrepresented" in practice means "representing those whom you choose to represent" It can all too easily become a virtuous rationalisation for promoting whatever happens to suit the individual planner's personal taste.

But what about citizen participation? Is not this the way for the planner to know the public mind and thus be able to carry out the public will? But, to repeat, there is not one public but many. The central weakness in the principle of participatory democracy is summed up in the question: who participates? In the real world of planning at any but the most local scale the answer is likely to be a group of activists (again, the word is not meant in any pejorative or partisan sense) either self-selected or, perhaps worse, selected intentionally or otherwise by the planners.

Thus a respectable camouflage of "democracy" is draped over the reality of minority power. This can be extremely effective, by the way, as demonstrated more than once during the last few years. The result may be, from a genuinely democratic point of view, the worst of all possible worlds: to enable a particular group to gain its own self-interested ends in the name of participatory democracy and "the ordinary people". Participatory democrats and "ordinary people" are, on the whole, as selfish as anyone else: a regrettable fact apparently sometimes overlooked by the more enthusiastic advocates of citizen participation in planning. Almost certainly, one of the consequences of this is that some actions which are called for to the ultimate benefit of the community at large would never receive that community's majority support.

If, as is alleged, representative democracy favours the Establishment, the prosperous and influential, at least its processes and its weaknesses are fairly open. If it falls short of the democratic ideal, at least we know how, and how far. With participatory democracy as currently practised in North America we have in reality a selective participation the validity of whose claim to represent the general will is unknown but often very dubious.

This is not, of course, an argument that planners should not concern themselves with the public interest. Quite the contrary. It is an argument only that they should be very cautious about assuming that they are gifted with special virtue to know the public good, or special wisdom to do the public will. It is all too easy to disguise intellectual arrogance as moral superiority, even from oneself. Similarly, it is not an argument against citizen participation in planning, but only in favour of recognising its limitations, and that it not be regarded as a magic carpet to correct and tidy solutions to planning problems.

Winston Churchill summed it up in his remark about democracy (and he meant representative democracy) being the worst possible system of government except for all the others. It isn't efficient, it isn't equitable, and its results are sometimes downright bad. But planners should think very carefully and clearly, and examine their consciences very thoroughly, before they conclude that they must obey the higher call of the "public interest" rather than the instructions of mundane elected politicians.

It has been suggested in this paper that the planner in the public service is answerable to four constituencies: his personal values, his professional conscience, his elected employers, and the general public. It is not to be inferred that these are invariably in conflict. If it were so, the planner's life would be intolerable and a change of trade the only possible solution. When such conflicts

do arise, it is always possible that the reason may in fact be that the planner himself is misconceiving, or has forgotten, his proper role. To repeat, he is an adviser. It is not his job to decide on policy or to try to predetermine the decisions of the legitimate decision-makers. If he recommends a particular course of action, his professional responsibility demands that the grounds upon which he does so be clear not only to himself but to his political superiors. That means not only getting his arithmetic right, but equally important, understanding clearly, and explaining clearly, what his premises and assumptions are. If he doesn't know, he is professionally incompetent; if he knows but doesn't explain, he is professionally dishonest. In fact, the planner should not normally propose a single policy direction or course of action at all, because this implies that there is only one "right" solution, which is hardly ever true of planning problems. The proper role of the planner as public servant is to define the range of alternative policies or courses of action, and to give his best professional judgment as to the likely consequences and implications of each. If he believes that one course is to be preferred over another, he should know, and explain clearly, why he prefers it -- and if it is only because of his personal values, he should probably forget about it. The most efficacious -- and ethical -- way for a planner to keep his various constituencies in harmony is to recognise clearly what his job is, and not to try to usurp that of the political decision-maker.

Again to avoid possible misunderstanding, it is not to be inferred that the planner should have no opinion of his own, or that he should not present his opinion as long as he can support it convincingly. And if his views are consistently ignored, he is likely to start worndering if the proper course of action is to resign. Indeed, there are probably few conscientious planners who have not been in this position at one time or another. Popular belief to the contrary, planners are human and like to eat. But apart from that, the planner with inclinations to martyrdom -- and the people who criticise planners for being more concerned about their cushy jobs than about their principles -- should at least try to weigh as objectively as possible the personal and political frustrations against the actual or potential value of maintaining the voice of dissent, even of conscience, which may one day bear fruit on seemingly unpromising soil. This is one of the very real and practical dilemmas of the planner as public servant, not least because it is one in which the rationalization of self-interest is only too easy. When the planner's advice is ignored or distorted, and all his conscientious efforts seem to be wasted, is it better -- is it more in the public interest -- for him to depart under a halo of moral rectitude, or to hang in there and try to maintain what influence he can on political decision-making? The latter course may be less spectacular, but not necessarily less courageous or less useful.

In resolving such problems it is important above all that the planner carefully examine his own sensibilities and motivations, that he satisfy himself that he is not mistaking ego for professional conscience, arrogance for professional judgment. For this reason if no other -- and there are of course many others -- it is imperative that the planner be able to think clearly, rationally and honestly. His education should equip him to do so. There was a time when planners were considered primarily as arbiters or synthesisers among competing interests and specialties, so that the ability to make informed and rational judgments was the heart of their stock-in-trade. In time it came to be recognised that they possessed technical skills of their own. This was an important advance for the profession, but the essence of the planner's job still lies in making informed judgments, and not least in weighing against each other the demands of his four constituencies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nigel Richardson is a graduate in planning of McGill University and the University of Liverpool in England, and a member of the Canadian Institute of Planners and the Royal Town Planning Institute. A professional planner for over 25 years, he has held senior positions at the local, regional and provincial levels of planning. He has worked as a consultant and as a public servant for both provincial and municipal government. Currently, in course of transition from the Ontario civil service to return to private practice as an associate of Resources Management Consultants Ltd., he is spending a term as visiting professor in the Department of City Planning at the University of Manitoba.

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